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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the Broadway musical "Cats" and by T. S. Eliot's collection of poems, "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," this language arts teaching unit for seventh grade includes a variety of activities using the poems and musical as focal points. Activity types include the following: (1) reading, listening, and singing activities in which students sing along with songs from "Cats" and read Eliot's poems aloud; (2) writing cat limericks; (3) compiling a cat spelling and vocabulary list, which can be reinforced using sentence dictation, sentence combining, and sentence composing activities; (4) working in groups to compile lists of cat items and then writing an essay centered on the topic of the list; (5) composing humorous cat anecdotes; (6) writing an expository essay after brainstorming or engaging in library research on a cat-related topic; and (7) compiling a booklet of cat poetry from both published sources and student writing. The guide then suggests additional activities such as original poetry writing and creating parodies of Eliot's style, cautions that it is possible to overdo a theme unit like this one, and warns teachers of cat haters to remind students that writing condemning cats can be as appropriate as praise. (SKC)

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Eliot's Cats and a CATalog of Language Arts Activities

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

A recent trip to New York City included attending a performance of the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical Cats. It was a very special experience, and "experience" is an appropriate word to describe this unique musical. The audience does not impassively view and listen to Cats--they become directly involved. A small part of the audience is actually seated on the stage itself. Throughout the production the human "cats" prowl up and down the aisles of the theater. At one point Rum Tum Tugger, a cat character from the musical, escorts a woman from the audience onto the stage for a brief dance. Part of the feeling of involvement is achieved through the set design. The entire theater is transformed into an alley--from the balcony railing to the stage floor. Intermission provided an opportunity for the audience to "prowl" on the stage and meet with Deuteronomy, one of the stars of Cats. The evening was joyous, full of fabulous songs, dances, costumes, special effects, lights, and memorable cat characters. It was an experience one had to share with others, and I chose to share it with my seventh grade English classes.

As is well-known by now, Cats is based on Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats by T. S. Eliot. The middle school at which I teach is in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. T. S. Eliot was born in St. Louis, and it is significant that in his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he compared the yellow fog of St. Louis to a cat "... that rubs its back upon the window-panes." Eliot won the Tony award in 1983 for the lyrics to Cats, his wife accepting the award on his behalf. Most of the poems comprising Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (1939) are set to music complete and in their originally published form by Andrew Lloyd Webber. As a seventh

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grade English teacher my acquaintance with Old Possum was limited to one poem, "Macavity: The Mystery Cat" published in the seventh grade literature anthology Projection in Literature by Scott, Foresman. It is a delightful and amusing poem, a joy to read aloud. As the music composer Andrew Lloyd Webber himself states in the book Cats, The Book of the Musical, "Old Possum contains verses that are extremely musical; they have rhythms that are very much their own, like 'Rum Tum Tugger' or 'Old Deuteronomy' and although clearly they dictate to some degree the music that will accompany them, they are frequently of irregular and exciting metre and are very challenging to a composer."

Old Possum itself has no story line. It is simply a collection of poems naming and describing various cats. The poems were originally written by Eliot about his cats and then given to his friends and their children. The poems represent a tribute to cats as individuals with distinct characters and names. This theme is stated in the closing poem, "The Ad-dressing of Cats."

> You've read of several kinds of Cat,
> And my opinion now is that
> You should need no interpreter
> To understand their character.
> You now have learned enough to see
> That Cats are much like you and me
> And other people whom we find
> Possessed of various types of mind.
>
> . . .
>
> A Cat's entitled to expect
> These evidences of respect.
> And so in time you reach your aim
> And finally call him by his NAME.
>
> So this is this, and that is that:
> And there's how you AD-DRESS A CAT.

With the images of Cats still fresh in my mind, I decided to develop a "Cats Unit" which would include a variety of language arts activities using as its focal point the poems from Old Possum and the Broadway cast recording of Cats.

READING, LISTENING, SINGING

The "Cats Unit" began with the oral reading and discussion of the poems from Old Possum and then listening to the musical interpretations of the poems. Sing-a-longs were encouraged, and having purchased the piano sheet music to Cats, I provided copies of the melodies as well. Seventh graders react enthusiastically to the rock rhythms of "Rum Tum Tugger" and the jazzy climax of "Macavity." The reading of the poems can be a wonderful activity in language "play"--listening to the sounds produced by the words themselves, and watching for creative "new" words, as is illustrated in this excerpt from "The Naming of Cats."

> When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
> The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
> His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
> Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
> His ineffable effable
> Effaineffable
> Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

Try having your students find "effaineffable" in the dictionary!

One of the words Eliot created that is used frequently in Old Possum is "Jellicle."

> Jellicle Cats come out to-night
> Jellicle Cats come one come all:
> The Jellicle Moon is shining bright--
> Jellicles come to the Jellicle Ball.

Students were asked to define "jellicle." What does its sound suggest?

Specific writing activities were also developed that can be "cataloged" as follows:

CAT LIMERICK

T. S. Eliot was, of course, a master at creating names for his cats: Mukustrap, Coricopat, Bombalurina, Jellylorum. One creative activity was to ask the students to name a cat followed by the creation of the ever-popular poem form--the limerick, as in Suzanne Weaver's limerick "Healthy Hints" excerpted from Cat Catalog by Judy Fireman.

There once was a cat named Knishes,
Who ate lots of fattening dishes.
When put on a diet--
He caused such a riot--
His owner, he meowed, was delicious.

The following directions for the "cat limerick" were given to the students.

1. The first line begins with "There once was a cat named _____."
2. Lines 1, 2, and 5 should rhyme; lines 3 and 4 should rhyme.
3. Two-syllable rhymes are funnier than one-syllable rhymes.
4. Lines 3 and 4 should be considerably shorter that lines 1, 2, and 5.
5. The punch line should be in the fifth line, or last line.

The students' limericks were illustrated and displayed in the room.

CAT WORDS

Another writing activity involved a cat spelling and vocabulary list which students were responsible for and included words like: feline, nocturnal, domestic, stealthy, etc. A variety of writing activitins could be used to reinforce the learning of these words.

1. Sentence Dictation: Students write sentences as they are dictated by the teacher using words from the spelling list.
2. Sentence Combining: Kernel sentences are written on the board, and students combine them into transforms. An example follows.

   Kernels: Cats are feline.
   Cats are domestic.
   Cats are nocturnal.

   Transform: Cats are domestic felines who are nocturnal.
3. Sentence Composing: Students use vocabulary words in creating sentences of their own. Some could be encouraged to use two vocabulary words in a single sentence.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Before any further writing assignments, the students were divided into groups for a pre-writing activity. Each group was assigned the task of compiling one of the following lists:

1. Look through Old Possum and compile a list of cat names.
2. Make a list of popular cats in cartoons, comic strips, movies, short stories, TV commercials, books, fairy tales, songs, etc. Suggestions: Heathcliff, Garfield, etc.
3. Make a list of the cat influence on our every day language, such as catnap, copycat, letting the cat out of the bag, the cat that swallowed the canary, etc.
4. Make a list of words that have the letters "cat" in them but have nothing to do with cats, such as catastrophe, catalog, etc.

These lists then serve as a take-off point for more creative writing assignments:

1. Write your own origin for a "cat cliche." For example, where did the phrase "raining cats and dogs" come from?
2. Write a composition explaining the popularity of many cartoon cats. What do many of them have in common?
3. Explain the origin of some of T. S. Eliot's names for his cats, such as Deuteronomy or Macavity.
4. Use several cat cliches in your own original sentences or combine as many of them as you can in a paragraph.
5. Compile a dictionary of cat phrases using your own original definitions.

CAT ANECDOTE

After sharing the above assignments with one another, the students were then asked to compose a cat anecdote, a brief story about some interesting or humorous happening concerning a cat, either real or imagined. The students were reminded to follow these steps:

1. Begin by setting the stage, providing background.
2. Tell the story, adding details as needed.
3. Comment briefly and, if possible, cleverly.

Upon completion, the cat anecdotes were read orally in class or in peer groups.

CAT ESSAY

Depending on the skill level of the class, a five-sentence or five-paragraph expository composition could be assigned. Topics could be brainstormed, such as "Cats Are Clever," "Cats Are Agile," etc. The following formula could be introduced to the students:

1. Introduce point of view, arousing reader interest.
2. Give one example supporting the main idea.
3. Give second example from personal experience. Show how it is tied in to the point of view.
4. Give a third example strongly emphesizing the point of view.
5. State a conclusion that repeats the point of view and explains it.

If time allows, library research could be employed to study other cat topics, such as: the reverence of cats as gods in Egyptian culture, cats in history, the training and care of cats, cat legends and superstitions, the various breeds of cats (wild and domestic), etc.

CAT POETRY BOOKLET

Other cat poems besides those written by Eliot were also read and discussed. The poetry anthology Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle includes a delightful collection including "Catalogue" by Rosalie Moore, "Poem" by William Carlos Williams, "On a Night of Snow" by Elizabeth Coatsworth, "For a Dead Kitten" by Sara Henderson Hay, and "Oz." by Eve Merriam.

After analyzing the above poems the students were assigned some original poetry writing using a series of "formula" poems. The following include examples of student writing.

1) Five Step Poem or Cinquain--a five-line poem

Cats	(a noun)
Agile, nocturnal	(2 adjectives)
Purring, scratching, hissing	(3 verbs)
Independent in their ways	(short phrase or sentence)
Felines	(a noun, synonym)

2) Septone--7 lines depending on one's telephone number for the prescribed number of syllables on each line

3 Along the
5 window sill he walks
2 tipping
3 flower pots
4 and jumping off
4 always landing
5 on his feet again.

3) Simile Poem--using a simile, follow the pattern below.

Cats are like royalty
dignified confident
independent regal
Worshiped by the ancient Egyptians
Doing whatever they choose.

4) Acrostic Poem--if read top to bottom the first letters spell out the theme.

Cats are a carefree,
Agile and
Thoroughly independent
Species of animal.

These four poems were then compiled in a book form and illustrated.

AFTERWORD

At the risk of beating a dead "cat," as you can see, the possibilities are limitless for incorporating language arts activities into a "Cats Unit." Other suggestions might include more original poetry writing, or perhaps a parody of T. S. Eliot's style in his poems from Old Possum.

At this point, a word of caution might be in order. One must be careful to avoid overdoing the cat theme as one of my seventh grade boys brought to my attention midway through the unit when he commented, "But I can't write about cats. I hate cats." Not letting him off the hook, I explained that there was no greater motivation to write than to vent one's hostility toward the

subject. An essay or poem can just as easily condemn a cat as praise it. However, what I'm sure kept the "Cats Unit" going was not my personal attitude toward cats (I can take them or leave them, much like a cat's attitude toward humans), but rather my personal enthusiasm for the musical Cats and that marvelous weekend in the Big Apple, and the opportunity such a "Cats Unit" provides to bring together so many separate and distinct disciplines which have a tendency to become fragmented in a language arts course. In any event, I can say CATegorically, it was not only a fun three-week unit for teacher and students, but one that accomplished many of the objectives of an integrated language arts program.

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